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Professional Development Reading Pack

No. 19

Wellbeing

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Wellbeing is advocated as a positive, more inclusive approach to development, which goes beyond a narrow focus on policy or programme objectives to comprehend the real impact on people's lives. Wellbeing is, however, a highly contested term, with different concepts and methods producing quite different results. This briefing provides a guide to the main approaches and their strengths and weaknesses.

There are four main approaches to wellbeing in policy. The first, comprehensive approach is known in shorthand as '**beyond GDP**'. This argues the need to move beyond a sole or primary emphasis on economic growth as the marker of progress. Conceptually, this links to Sen's capability approach, and its emphasis on what people can do and be, rather than income or utility. It also builds on the social indicators movement dating back to the 1960s. A prominent example is the Stiglitz report (2009). The need for a broad range of indicators is now quite widely accepted.

The second is **personal wellbeing, and the promotion of individual health and happiness**. The archetype is health policy. Approaches typically stress personal responsibility and behaviour change, and have a substantive view of what constitutes wellbeing, in terms of optimal functioning (physical and/or psychological). Critics suggest universalist models do not take sufficient account of culture and context and may contain class or other social biases in their definition of the good.

The third approach identifies '**subjective wellbeing**' (SWB) as a measure of utility, to evaluate policy or programme effectiveness. Its great attraction is its slimness, or parsimony, as it asks simply 'how happy' (or satisfied) people are, with no concern as to how happiness is defined. The 'Easterlin paradox' (1974) spawned a major debate by questioning the assumed relationship between GDP per capita and happiness (as SWB). Various measures of SWB are now widely used in national statistics and international indices. Critiques include: doubts as to the credibility of quantifying happiness; the sensitivity of indicators to immediate triggers;



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variability in methods and datasets undermining comparability; shifting standards of comparison; the lack of traceable links between policy outcomes and happiness scores; and the many social and cultural variables that mediate between how people feel and the scores they may report.

In practice these three approaches often overlap. Comprehensive wellbeing may incorporate a SWB indicator; strong advocacy of happiness or SWB tends to shift over time into a broader concern with personal or comprehensive wellbeing. All rely primarily on quantitative methods, aimed at measurement or assessment, and assume the individual as the unit of analysis.

The fourth approach **focuses on local concepts of wellbeing and what makes life good**, and may be used to question dominant models of development. Less established than the other concepts, there is growing convergence around the term 'relational wellbeing'. Drawing mainly on qualitative methods, this sees wellbeing as contingent on, and emerging through, spatial, material and social relationships. It (stress on meaning and) questions the opposition between 'subjective' and 'objective', as in everyday life material, relational and subjective are fundamentally intertwined. It also emphasises how all accounts of wellbeing reflect the methods that produce them. *Buen vivir*, or 'living well together' has entered formal politics in some parts of Latin America, fusing claims for fundamental rights with elements in the worldviews of indigenous peoples. Critiques emphasise the comparative complexity of such approaches, which limits their portability between different contexts, and question the viability of establishing a radical alternative to the current model of development.

As wellbeing becomes more embedded in policy discourses, so the need to address wellbeing increases – for individuals, organisations, businesses, and governments. This may be positive, prioritising the promotion of conditions which enable people to thrive. But it may also intensify self-monitoring, with greater pressure to produce and perform happiness or wellbeing as a marker of personal or collective value. In itself wellbeing is politically indeterminate. To engage effectively one must recognise wellbeing as a field of power, and how concepts and methods are implicated in this.

Key Readings

Reading 1: Graham, C. (2011). Does more money make you happier? Why so much debate? *Applied Research on Quality of Life*, 6, 219-239.

<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11482-011-9152-8>

Graham introduces the main debates spawned by the 'Easterlin paradox', and emphasises how the use of different methods may underlie much of the dispute.

Reading 2: White, S.C. (2010). Analysing wellbeing. A framework for development policy and practice. *Development in Practice*, 20 (2), 158-172.

Earlier free version available as working paper: Analysing wellbeing. A framework for development practice (WeD Working Paper 9/44).

http://www.welldev.org.uk/wed-new/workingpapers/workingpapers/WeDWP_09_44.pdf

White sets out a simple framework outlining relational wellbeing for use in policy and practice

Reading 3: OECD (2013). Concept and validity. In *OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being* (pp 27-59). European Union: OECD Publishing.

<http://www.oecd.org/statistics/Pages%20from%20Guidelines%20on%20Measuring%20Subjective%20Well-being-Chapter-1.pdf>

<http://www.oecd.org/statistics/guidelines-on-measuring-subjective-well-being.htm>

The OECD presents strong advocacy for the use of SWB in policy contexts. Many might doubt whether it can deliver all the OECD claims for it.

Reading 4: Stiglitz, J., Sen, A., Fitoussi, J-P. (2009). *Executive summary of the Report of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress* (pp 7-18).

http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/documents/rapport_anglais.pdf.

The Stiglitz report represents a key political text advocating a comprehensive wellbeing approach. It is also clearly a compromise document, bringing together a wide variety of quite diverse views.

Reading 5: Atkinson, S. (2013). Beyond components of wellbeing: the effects of relational and situated assemblage. *Topoi*, 32, 137-144.

<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11245-013-9164-0>

Atkinson presents a thoughtful analysis of a relational approach to wellbeing, including its application in policy.

Reading 6: Frey, B. S. and Gallus, J. (2013). Subjective Well-Being and Policy. *Topoi*, 32 (2), 207-212.

<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11245-013-9155-1>

Frey and Gallus point out the dangers of political manipulation if SWB is adopted as a primary marker of government success.

Reading 7: White, S.C. and Jha, S. (2014). Briefing No. 2: The Politics of Wellbeing, Conservation and Development in Chiawa, Zambia. Wellbeing and Poverty Pathways.

<http://www.wellbeingpathways.org/resources/briefing-papers/176-briefing-paper2>

White and Jha present a case example of how wellbeing can be used in policy contexts.

Questions to guide readings

1. What themes are common (if any) to all uses of 'wellbeing'?
2. Are there any universal understandings or sources of happiness?
3. Is it important to know what people are thinking when they are asked 'how happy' they are?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of slimmer versus more comprehensive measures of national wellbeing?
5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of SWB as a measure of policy or programme success?
6. Why might 'living well' or 'full life' be preferred to 'wellbeing' as a way to articulate alternative political, social and economic visions?
7. How important is space and the physical environment to the experience of wellbeing?
8. Does a wellbeing approach imply, or must it be complemented by, a commitment to social justice, human rights and environmental protection and promotion?